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ABSTRACT

In this study, everyday mother-to-toddler speech patterns among disadvantaged and advantaged groups were examined in the home environment. The Schachter FIS-C (Functions of Interpersonal Speech of Caretakers) language measuring instrument was applied to mother speech in three sociolinguistic urban groups: black disadvantaged, black advantaged, and white advantaged. Advantage was defined mainly in terms of mother's education. Ten mother-toddler dyads per group, matched for toddler age, sex, birth order and maternal employment, were studied during two 72-minute home sessions each, during which all dyadic verbal and non-verbal interactions were recorded by an observer-scorer. Scores were subject to two-way analysis of covariance, sociolinguistic group x sex with age-of-child as covariate. Results, covering 23,539 mother statements, show striking differences between disadvantaged and advantaged groups, with almost no differences between the black and white advantaged groups. No significant group differences were found in the amount of spontaneous speech. Extensive class differences were found in the social or affective domain, rather than in the teaching or learning domain. (Author/BF)

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Everyday Speech Acts of Disadvantaged and Advantaged Mothers to Their Toddlers

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"Surprising as it may seem many adults need help in learning how to talk to children in productive ways" to quote Cazden, Baratz, Labov, and Palmer (1971) from their article 'Language Development in Day Care Programs.' To provide some of this help has been our aim, based on the widespread agreement (Baldwin and Baldwin, 1973; Hess and Shipman, 1965; Levenstein, 1970; Tulkin and Kagan 1972) that the early verbal environment of the disadvantaged child plays a key role in his/her later school performance.

Our study has three distinctive features. (1) We study the everyday verbal environment in the home. Previous data on this kind has been collected only in the laboratory setting (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1973; Hess & Shipman, 1965, etc.). (2) We study the verbal environment of toddlers. Golden et al's (1971) finding that social class differences in cognitive performance begin at two suggest that toddler-age may be the critical period for the verbal environment. (3) We study the speech act (Searle, 1969) rather than syntax or semantics, the interpersonal functions of speech (Halliday, 1970) rather than its structure or meaning. Most of our early intervention efforts attempt compartmentalized training of linguistic or cognitive competence, despite the fact that the dominant philosophy in early childhood education, the whole-child approach, deplores this compartmentalization and assumes instead that the early development of language and thought occurs in intimate interaction with everyday social and affective factors, themselves extrinsic to questions of competence (Minuchin & Biber, 1968).

To shed light on this cognitive-affective interaction we have been examining, at the micro-level, the interpersonal uses of speech in everyday communication. First, we devised, empirically, a category system for the interpersonal functions of the child's spontaneous (self-initiated) speech, the FIS-P (Schachter et al., 1974). Based on the FIS-P, we then devised a comparable category system, the FIS-C, for the interpersonal functions of caretaker speech, both <u>spontaneous</u> and <u>responsive</u> to the child's spontaneous communications (Schachter et al., 1976). In the present study we apply the FIS-C to the speech acts of mothers in three sociolinguistic

groups, black disadvantaged, black advantaged, and white advantaged.

We studied black poverty because of our urban location. We added the white advantaged group because we were not interested in social class in itself, but rather in later school performance. We planned to focus on those speech scores where the two low-risk advantaged groups do not differ significantly from each other, but where they both differ significantly from the high-risk black disadvantaged group (risk of later school problems).

Methods

Advantage was defined in terms of years of mother education because half of our disadvantaged group was either fatherless or on welfare. The other socio-economic indicators when available correlated highly with mother education. Mean education was 11.75 years for the black disadvantaged mothers, 17.04 for the black advantaged, and 17.75 for the white advantaged. There were 30 mother-toddler dyads, 10 per group, each with one boy and one girl at ages 22, 25, 28, 31 and 34 months (+1 month), each group matched for toddler birth order, size of family, and maternal employment.

For 72 minutes on each of two mornings, with only mother and child present and TV off (observation delayed for consistent Sesame Street watchers), all dyadic verbal and nonverbal interactions were recorded by an observer who later scored. The eye-witness observer-scorer was black for black dyads, white for white, with high reliabilities between the two, an average of 80.0%. There were also tension reducing measures. The advantaged toddlers attended a university play group (two mornings a week) so that their mothers were accustomed to student observers with their yellow pads and stopwatches. For the disadvantaged group, we provided two preliminary visits to help make the mothers more comfortable.

Results

Total Frequency

Figure 1 shows the total frequency of mother speech acts (24,192) for each of the three groups, black disadvantaged, black advantaged, and white advantaged, and

for the advantaged groups combined. Throughout the paper, whenever the advantaged groups do not differ significantly from each other, we present the combined mean. Figure 1 also shows, for each group, the total frequency of the child's communication acts (9,831), both verbal and nonverbal, to which the mother responds. For both mother and child, the frequency of responsive and spontaneous communications are shown. For mother speech acts, the advantaged groups show significant increments for total frequency and for frequency of responsive speech acts, with no significant group differences for frequency of spontaneous speech acts. For total frequency of the child's communications, there is also a significant increment for the advantaged, but no differences in the proportion of responsive and spontaneous communications among the groups. Altogether advantaged mothers speak twice as much as disadvantaged and produce three times as much responsive speech. Their children also communicate twice as much.

Categories and Subcategories

Table 1 shows the percent of mother speech acts for the 10 main categories of the FIS-C, those categories with adequate frequency ($>1\%$ for two groups or $>2\%$ for one group). These categories account for 93.3% of the mother's speech. Another 3.3% is accounted for by routines, like "What?," "God Bless you," "Hi," etc. The remaining 3.4% of mother speech occurs in categories of inadequate frequency. With regard to the 10 main FIS-C categories, 6 are predominately responsive and 4 are predominately spontaneous (See Table 1), although any category score can and does occur as either a responsive or spontaneous speech act.

For the 6 predominately responsive mother speech categories, there are 3 main categories of child communication to which the mother responds: Desire requests ("More paper"), Reports ("Mommy, trike"), and Learning communications ("What's this?" or labeling). These child categories, scored in accordance with the FIS-P (Schachter et al., 1974), covered 78% of the child's communications to the mother. Table 1 shows a significant increment for advantaged mothers for Responds to Child Desire and for Responds to Child Report, but no significant differences between groups for Re-

sponds to Child Learning. Subcategories with significant increments for the category Responds to Child Desire were Explicates Desire ("You want some paper?") and Fulfills Desire plus Talk ("Here's some"). For the category Responds to Child Report, there were significant increments for the subcategories Explicates Reports ("You're riding your trike?") and Confirms Reports ("Okay"). There was also a significant increment for the advantaged for the category Responds to Child Ego-Enhancing, subcategory Ego Boosts ("Wow!;" "Terrific!").

For the 4 predominately spontaneous categories, the 2 most frequent were Restricts-Commands, Controls and Provides Knowledge, Teaches. The disadvantaged group showed a significant increment for the category Controls and there were no significant group differences for the category Teaches. For the Controls category, there are three subcategories, Dont's, Do's, and Refusals. It is the subcategory Don't that shows a significant increment for the disadvantaged. For the disadvantaged mother, 1 in 3.7 speech acts is Don't, while the comparable figure for the advantaged is 1 in 11.5 speech acts.

Altogether there are significant class differences in categories representing 53.3% of mother speech. Only one category, representing 6.9% of mother speech, Reports on Child ("Susy is drawing") shows a significant difference between the advantaged groups, with more such reports for the black advantaged. When we examine subcategories, we find class differences in subcategories representing 28.8% of mother speech and race differences for only 2.3%. It should also be noted that the categories most related to learning and teaching, Responds to Child Learning and Provides Knowledge, Teaches, show no significant group differences.

Minor Scores

In addition to the main category and subcategory scores of the FIS-C there were minor scores showing the following significant group differences. When the advantaged mothers say Don't, they explain and make explicit reference to explanatory norms; when they produce Refusals, they provide substitutes or alternatives. When

the disadvantaged group Teaches, they are more likely to teach letters and numbers; the use of explanatory norms while teaching show no significant group differences. We also studied repetitions, a persistent focus of research interest in current psycholinguistic research on mother talk to toddlers (Snow, 1972; Newport, 1976). We found no significant differences in self-repetition, mother repeating herself, but a significant increment for the advantaged in child repetition, mother repeating the child. Advantaged mothers show increments for Total Child-Repetition, Altered Child-Repetition, and for Expansions.

Control for child's Communication Initiatives

Finally, we examined the crucial question of whether our results on the mother's responsive speech are independent of the child's spontaneous input, that is, whether the results are the same when we control for the child's communication initiatives. The answer is affirmative. Table 2 summarizes the major evidence bearing on this issue. It can be seen that when we control for the child's initiatives, the advantaged mothers show significantly more responses per child initiative: and, when these mothers do respond, they respond in kind, i.e. child Desire requests -- Mother Responds to Child Desire, Explicates, Fulfills, etc; Child Reports -- Mother Responds to Child Report, Explicates, Confirms, etc. On the other hand, when the disadvantaged mothers respond they are significantly more likely to respond in the Control category; or they simply ignore the child's initiatives.

Summary and Discussion

The results can be summarized as follows: (1) There are extensive differences in mother speech between the disadvantaged and the advantaged groups with almost no significant differences between the black and white advantaged groups. That is, the differences are along class lines, not race lines. (2) There were no significant group differences in amount of spontaneous speech. Nor were there significant group differences in categories most related to teaching and learning, Responds to Child Learning and Provides Knowledge, Teaches. These findings challenge the facile

polarity of the cognitive deficit-difference controversy. (3) Instead of finding differences in the teaching and learning domain, what we ordinarily view as the cognitive aspect of the verbal environment, we find extensive class differences in the social or-affective domain. Advantaged mothers appear to facilitate and support the actions of their toddlers. They show an increment in total responsive speech. They respond in kind to their child's initiatives, explicating and fulfilling desires, explicating and confirming reports, etc. They minimize Don'ts, and when they do say Don't, they feel the need to justify it with an explanation. When they refuse, they suggest an alternative or substitute. They repeat the child's own speech, either checking to make sure they have understood the child's communication or confirming the child's communication.

Moving to the level of theory, we have called the advantaged mothers speech pattern alter-ego speech in the light of Piaget's theory of primary adualism which describes a primary state of lack of differentiation between the child's self and the other, in the years before three (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). During this stage the advantaged mothers seem to serve the role of the ego the child does not yet possess, amplifying the child's own impact on his environment, and affirming his/her role as the active explorer, thereby indirectly influencing cognitive development. As Rutter (1977) points out, we psychologists have been concerned traditionally with what adults do to children, in this case how they talk to children, and our disadvantaged mothers seem to adopt this traditional approach. Our findings indicate that we need a new vocabulary to describe how adults talk responsively with children. Hopefully, the micro-level speech scores of the FIS-C, plus the everyday naturalistic data of this ecological study, will help provide some of this new vocabulary.

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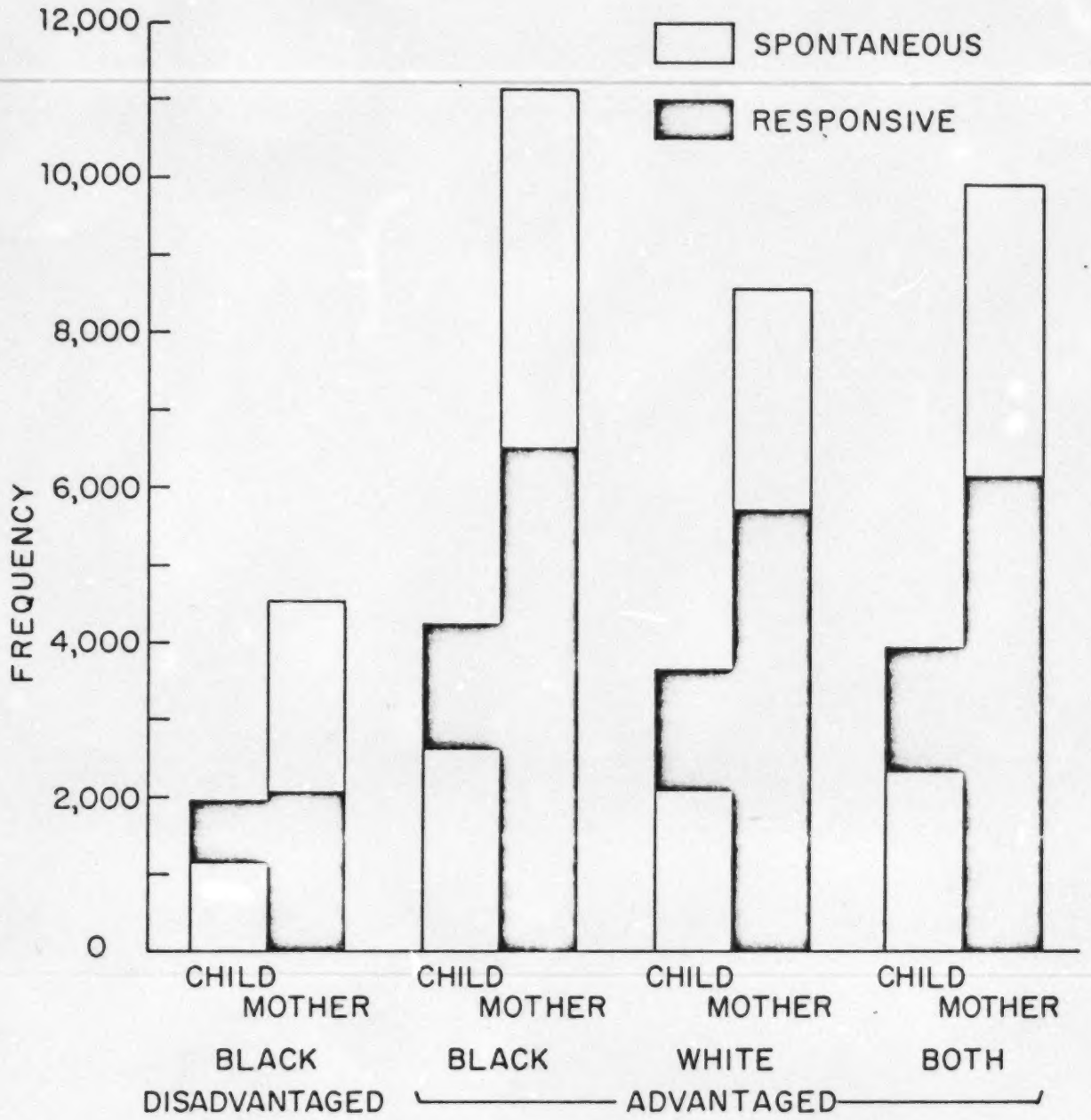

Figure 1. Frequency of mother speech acts (tall bars) and child communications acts (short bars), verbal and nonverbal, to which the mother responds. Frequencies are shown for black disadvantaged, black advantaged, and white advantaged groups, and for the average of both advantaged groups. Dark areas show responsive speech or communications; white areas spontaneous.

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Table 1

Mother Speech Acts for FIS-C Category Scores

-Mean Percent-

	Groups			
	Disadvantaged	Advantaged		
Scores	Black	Black	White	Both
Predominately Responsive Category Scores				
Responds to Ch expressive	1.5	2.9	3.1	3.0
Responds to Ch desire	5.5	8.8	12.4*	10.6*
Responds to Ch ego-enhancing	0.3	1.7*	1.8*	1.7*
Responds to Ch collaborative	1.5	5.5	4.4	5.0
Responds to Ch learning	7.6	8.8	12.4	10.6
Responds to Ch report	6.6	12.5*	10.0	11.3*
Predominately Spontaneous Category Scores				
Restricts-commands, Controls	53.4	31.1*	28.1*	29.6*
Provides knowledge, Teaches	8.6	9.6	11.0	9.8
Reports on Ch	5.1	8.0*	5.1	---+
Reports on self, others, things	2.5	3.8	4.5	4.2

*p .05 Scheffé comparing disadvantaged vs. advantaged group(s).

+p<.05 Scheffe comparing advantaged groups.

Table 2

Ratios: Mother Speech Act Responses to Child's Spontaneous Communications

-Summary-

Ratios	Groups: Disadvantaged	Advantaged		
	Black	Black	White	Both
First Response Evoked				
Predominately Responsive Categories				
Responds in kind	0.51	0.73*	0.73*	0.73*
Desire/Ch Desires	0.25	0.52*	0.57*	0.54*
Report/Ch Reports	0.55	0.77*	0.82*	0.80*
Learning/Ch Learnings	0.75	0.84	0.82	0.83
Predominately Spontaneous Categories				
Restricts-commands, Controls	0.31	0.14*	0.16*	0.15*
Provides knowledge, Teaches	0.00	0.01*	0.02*	0.02*
Routines: What	0.08	0.05	0.05	0.05
Ignore	0.10	0.03*	0.04*	0.04*
Total Responses Evoked				
Predominately Responsive Categories				
Responds in kind	0.63	1.17*	1.13*	1.15*
Desire/Ch Desires	0.41	1.09*	1.06*	1.08*
Report/Ch Reports	0.74	1.12*	1.09*	1.11*
Learning/Ch Learnings	1.02	1.19	1.22	1.21
Predominately Spontaneous Categories				
Restricts-commands, Controls	0.48	0.29*	0.40	0.34*
Provides knowledge, Teaches	0.02	0.09	0.14*	0.12*
Routines: What	0.08	0.05	0.05	0.05
Ignore	0.10	0.03*	0.04*	0.04*
Mean response per Ch initiative	1.27	1.74*	1.79*	1.77*

*$p < .05$ Scheffé comparing disadvantaged vs. advantaged group(s).